



## Success Checklist for Becoming a CDL Driver

So, you're interested in becoming a truck driver? WONDERFUL!

Having your commercial driver's license (CDL) can open up a world of opportunities: from cross-country long-haul trips to being home every night with your family, working for a carrier or being an owner-operator. The commercial trucking industry can be a good career.

REAL Women in Trucking is committed to helping ladies find success as drivers. We have created this road map to help guide you through the steps to becoming a professional driver. Trucking isn't just a job, it's a lifestyle, and we recognize that this isn't for everyone. We encourage you to first ask yourself the following questions:

### **YOUR ROADMAP TO BECOMING A CDL DRIVER**

It's important that you read through this entire document before getting started.

#### **Is trucking the right choice for me?**

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| yes / no | Do I like driving?  |
| yes / no | Am I comfortable being away from home for extended periods of time?                               |
| yes / no | Am I ok with doing most things alone?   |
| yes / no | Do I handle stressful situations well?  |
| yes / no | Am I a self-starter that can efficiently and effectively manage my time with minimal supervision? |

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, this doesn't mean that trucking isn't the right career for you. **We encourage all women to join us for one of our free, monthly informational sessions.** Our board members will be on hand to answer all of your questions about the world of truck driving and share as much information as possible to help you make an informed decision.

And remember, if driving doesn't sound like a good fit for you, there are lots of other good-paying jobs in the transportation industry.

You should be fully prepared for this before you enter this industry. If trucking is the right fit for you, then let's get you started!

Truck drivers are subject to [Federal Hours of Service law](#) which dictates how long they can drive and how long they must stop and rest. In general, truck drivers can drive 11 hours a day, within a 14-hour timeframe and then they must park and rest for 10 hours.

They must not drive over 70 hours a week *in most cases*. Keep in mind the vast majority of truck drivers are only paid when they are driving on a “cents per mile” (CPM) scale.

They may work another 10 to 20 hours unpaid. This is called “detention” in the industry. It frequently occurs in the food sector. Keep that in mind when you decide what type of freight you want to haul.

Truck drivers are exempt from Fair labor standards for overtime pay. It is rare to find a truck driving job that is hourly pay, for all time worked. It is also rare that a local truck driving jobs will be offered to a new CDL holder since new drivers are not insurable and only some companies are willing to take on the risk and expense. Do not enter CDL school thinking you will immediately get a local driving job. You should also be aware that local jobs generally require physical labor to load and unload freight yourself.

As you move from CDL student to 1<sup>st</sup> year trainee, opportunities will open up to you if you do not have any citations or accidents. Living on the road seeing the country can be a wonderful experience if you have the mindset. Once you have at least 2 years of experience you will be eligible to work at some great private fleets or specialized carriers where the pay is in the high six digits after taxes. Keep in mind that there is currently no truth in recruiting laws in trucking so jumping from one carrier to another because you saw a recruiting ad promising high wages and lots of home time can be one disappointment after another. Be patient during your first critical year and focus on being a safe professional driver. This will open more opportunities than trying to chase promises from recruiters and other drivers who are likely getting a kickback as well for luring drivers to certain carriers. As a new CDL driver, you are a walking dollar sign so choose wisely and stay put for at least one year, preferable two at your starter company.

### **Getting your CLP and CDL Overview**

To be a truck driver you will need to pass a series of exams (knowledge, air brakes, and combination vehicles tests), pass both a medical exam and a drug test (including for marijuana regardless of if it is legal in your state). Once these are complete you will be considered a Commercial License Permit (CLP) holder and you can begin to learn your basic driving and backing skills. Upon completion of your training and passing your driving exams, you will receive you Commercial Driver License (CDL). At this point, you will be qualified to drive a truck and can begin applying for jobs.

### **Select a training program**

There are a few options for training programs: Public or Private CDL School program and company sponsored. Regardless of where you elect to do your training, it is imperative that you thoroughly research the program. Not all training programs are created equal and unfortunately, the trucking industry has developed a bad reputation for their recruitment and training practices. We also urge you to investigate hiring requirements at the starter company you have your heart set on before you sign a contract for CDL training. If you don't do this, you may find the starter company will not hire you with the graduation certificate you have received because they have a higher standard requirement.

**REAL Women in Trucking provides free list of preferred starter companies and some to steer clear from to help prospective students make smarter choices.**

**If you need additional help, please email [info@realwomenintrucking.org](mailto:info@realwomenintrucking.org) and someone will get in touch with you.**

### **Paying for your training**

In recent years, there has been an increased amount of state and federal funding made available including grants and sponsorships to help with training costs. We encourage you to spend some time researching these options to find one that's right for you. Your state unemployment office and community college financial aid office can help you see if there is funding available to pay for your CDL school tuition. Research grants for dislocated workers, homemakers that are for "workforce opportunity investment Act" funds. First-year pay is tough as a truck driver, regardless of what recruiting ads claim. Try to minimize your overhead and expenses. During your first critical year in trucking, your pay may be inconsistent. You will be less stressed from worrying about your bills if you keep expenditures to a minimum so you can focus on learning.

If you are fortunate enough to get a grant to pay for CDL School, make sure you spend it wisely. A community college program is always best, second would be a stand-alone CDL school because you will leave there with your CDL with no strings attached. Not all CDL schools are created equal though. You must know how to select a CDL School, not a CDL Mill.

There are 2 options for obtaining your CDL with no strings attached: **community college** or a **stand-alone private CDL school**.

Regardless of where you elect to do your training, it's essential that you find out the number of hours and type of training you will receive before you register for the program and sign contracts. RWIT strongly recommends that you only enroll in programs that will guarantee a diploma certifying you with 160+ hours plus Manual Transmission Qualified.

If you enroll in a program that does not guarantee 160 or more hours, there is a high probability that you will not be eligible to work for most preferable starter trucking carriers. Additionally, you want to make sure your training program has accommodations/protections in place if you will need extra time in the classroom or on the driving range. We have found the women excel in written portion of the CDL testing but take a bit longer on the driving skills portion. Many excellent women drivers who have decades of experience will tell you they took a bit longer to learn their driving skills and needed a patient teacher. Don't let your CDL school push you out the door when you need more practice time.

### **Community College training program**

Some community colleges offer CDL training programs. This is generally the best and less-expensive option, but it will take a bit longer (8-16 weeks). Classes are offered nights and weekends which is helpful if you will be working during your training.

### **Stand-alone (aka Private) training schools**

There are a vast number of training schools in every state across the country. Google "CDL training near me" to find those closest to you. These schools are generally more expensive than community college programs, but diplomas can be earned in as little as 4 weeks.

Stand-alone CDL schools are often referred to as CDL "Mills" due to the high number of complaints and reviews regarding the quality of training and lack of information students are taught. Though some mom & pop owned CDL Schools might offer good quality training from retired veteran truck drivers, there are larger chain CDL school that may not guarantee quality training. As a general rule, RWIT recommends researching CDL schools and avoiding CDL mills.

That being said, it's important to know that there *are* a number of good smaller “starter” schools run by veteran truck drivers who will teach you great basic skills that will benefit you immensely when you join your starter company. These CDL schools can be found with diligent research and by paying close attention to online reviews.

### **Company-sponsored training program**

Undoubtedly, you have probably seen and heard advertisements for company-sponsored training programs. In fact, some of these companies may come up top-ranked in your Google search, on tv, and the radio. There is a lot of information you need to know before you decide if one of these programs is right for you.

Though company sponsored training may seem like a quick way to get paid right away for people in crisis situations (i.e., facing homelessness or escaping domestic abuse) it comes with physical and financial risk.

Company-sponsored training programs have the highest reported incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment (SASH) towards women of any training programs in the industry. Especially those that require “team -driving” as a phase of training. The quality of this training is low. The focus in these companies is to use low wage student labor for dangerous team driving that normally demands premium pay for experienced level drivers. Company sponsored training also has strings attached to obtaining your certificate of completion. Many women who have been forced to abandon their company sponsored training for personal safety reasons are sent a bill for their tuition and are blacklisted from being hireable elsewhere.

We urge women to avoid company sponsored training but if they have no other choice, choose a company that does not require team driving as a phase of training. This situation puts you in both trainer/student and several months of student/student team driving situations that can be personally unsafe.

A Google search of “rape in trucking” and “trucking industry complaints” will reveal a plethora of information about SASH complaints, rape, and lawsuits including at which companies it is most prevalent. We encourage you to read the data.

### **Working with a recruiter to find your first job**

Representatives from trucking companies across the country will come to both community colleges and stand-alone schools in hopes of recruiting new graduates. Even the company sponsored starter companies have aggressive recruiters.

It's not uncommon for you to be approached by three or four recruiters, each with their own compensation and benefits packages. We know that for a lot of people, trucking is a path forward to a better, financially secure life and having several people, including other drivers offering great sounding packages can be exciting, and also overwhelming.

It's in your best interest to spend time with representatives from each of these companies hearing what they have to offer. RWIT has assembled a list of questions for you to ask your recruiter (see Resources Tab – Questions You Should Be Asking).

There is no law requiring truth in recruiting.

We recommend obtaining written proposals from a minimum of five companies. This should be followed by a Google search with the name of the company and the word "complaints". Ultimately, it's up to you to decide which company is right for you.

Many companies claim "guaranteed pay" for new drivers. On average, a first-year driver will make approximately \$37,000. If you choose a company sponsored program, you may have to sign a labor contract requiring you to stay with the company anywhere from eight to twelve months. You should understand that companies have the ability to blacklist you from future employment if you leave them before your labor contract has expired regardless of the reason. It is critical you fully understand these labor contracts. Read everything carefully before you sign and make sure to keep a copy of all documents for your records.

RWIT urges you to Google all CDL Schools and trucking companies followed by the word "complaints" and understand bad companies plant good reviews so you must be diligent to look for the bad reviews to determine if there is a pattern such as not getting drivers home when promised, pay shaving, wage theft, and other indications that the company isn't what they claim.

### **CDL training and requirements for certification**

Whether you choose community college, stand-alone, or a company sponsored CDL program, your training will encompass very basic driving skills. Often time, new drivers are surprised how much they actually don't know upon graduation. While you won't

know everything when you're just starting out, we do believe it's essential that you receive training for the following:

1. Pre-trip and post-trip inspection
2. How to couple and uncouple a tractor and trailer
3. How to take corners in your tractor-trailer without hitting curbs
4. How to make safe lane changes
5. How to shift gears if you do not have an automatic restriction on your CDL.

We encourage you to ask for additional training if these topics are not covered in your program.

You may not be confident on your ability to back up your truck by graduation from CDL school, but you must be able to do it well enough to pass your exam with the state examiner. This skill takes time to master. Even the most experienced truck driver has bad days backing their truck, so be patient with yourself.

Some drivers struggle with backing their truck for much of their 1st year so don't be too hard on yourself. Practice whenever you have a chance, and you will improve!

We have found that small "starter" schools tend to do the best job when it comes to this type of training, and we encourage people to consider this when they are selecting their program.

### **Overview on medical card and passing the drug test**

You'll be required to pass a Department of Transportation medical exam to obtain your medical card. This proves that you have no medical issues and are fit to drive a truck. Cards are valid from 90 days up to 2 years. You must use an approved medical examiner listed in the [Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration registry](#). There are some prescribed medications and medical conditions that will prohibit you from obtaining a CDL so make sure you are aware of this before you invest in a CDL school program.

You're also required to pass a drug screening. You may have to do a hair test depending on the carrier requirements. If you fail or refuse your drug screening you will be put into the FMCSA drug clearinghouse which will make it very difficult to be hired anywhere. There are substance abuse programs (SAP) to help you comply with FMCSA regulations to reinstate your CDL but there are very few companies that want to hire a SAP driver so make sure you do not get yourself in the drug clearinghouse with a dirty or refusal test result. Though you will not take your medical and drug screen until you are sent to do it

by your school or carrier, you should know if you will pass both before you proceed further.

### **Begin studying for your CLP**

You are required to have a commercial learners permit (CLP) in order to drive a truck. While you don't need a permit to enter truck driving school, we recommend you begin studying once you've selected your CDL school. Getting a jump start on your studying for the written portion of your CLP test will only improve your chances of success going forward. Your state Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) can provide you with a CDL licensing manual. It's important that you read through the entire state manual. Each state will have a few of their own questions on their CDL exams that won't be found in an online practice exam. Should you end up selecting a training program that is in a different state, be sure to get that state CDL licensing manual. Your CDL school may cover the cost of your CLP permit as part of your tuition. We suggest selecting your school prior to taking the exam to ensure you don't pay if you don't need to.

You'll get your CLP when you pass your permit written test and your CDL when you pass your driving skills test.

### **Free online practice exams**

We suggest taking the free practice exams before going to the DMV for the actual permit test. These practice exams can be taken as many times as necessary. We recommend re-testing yourself with free online practice tests until you score 100% at least 3 times in a row before you head to the DMV for your official test.

The same preparation process should be followed for any endorsements you plan to get such as HazMat or Tankers.

There are a number of free online resources including apps that allow you to take practice tests on your phone. Just Google "Free CDL Practice Exams" to find numerous choices available to you. You can also look in the Apple and Google Play store for apps that are helpful free CDL study aids.

Here is a sample: Free CDL Practice Exams with All Endorsements: [click here](#)

### **Endorsements**

Some companies may require endorsements upon hire or within 6 months of hire. Your starter company may reimburse you for the expense, but you should get this in writing beforehand. Free endorsement and CDL practice exams along with other free study tools



are generally offered on the same websites. Just Google “Free CDL Endorsement Practice Exams”.

Having an endorsement means you are qualified to drive a specific type of truck or haul material that requires an extra level of training. Endorsements can increase your value but it’s worth noting that they come with added risk.

Hazardous Materials (HazMat) and Tanker driver endorsements have an added level of responsibility and expense. For Instance: You will need to be fingerprinted and your record run through the FBI national database in order to receive a HazMat endorsement.

There is no guarantee how much more you will be paid for having an endorsement and it is up to you to decide if the risk (of what you’re hauling) is worth the increased pay. This is a personal decision that you should carefully consider before investing the time and money into these certifications.

Certifications to haul tankers of food grade material may be worth the investment to get a tanker endorsement. Maybe you are considering being a fuel tanker driver or HazMat chemicals. This is a big decision with risks to consider. Maybe you will want to get an endorsement to haul “Doubles” (double trailers) and/or “Triples” (triple trailers). This is another way to increase your income, but it’s important to fully understand these sectors and the risks associated to this work.